

The History of Christianity

By Colleen Messina

Have you ever seen a medieval tapestry? In one corner, knights on horseback might be fighting. In another section, there might be a peaceful monastery full of praying nuns. A lady might sit under a tree reading a book in the foreground. Pockets of people dot the hills as they chat about their medieval problems like the plague and how many baths were safe. The story of Christianity is like a tapestry. It has many colorful threads of crusading and contemplation, and it is full of surprising details!

Christianity started over two thousand years ago with the birth of Jesus Christ. He preached a message about the Kingdom of God. According to the Bible, he went all through Judea, performing many miracles and healing the sick. He was thought of as a rebel by the Roman authorities, who eventually crucified him. After his death, it is believed that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Jesus' message became the cornerstone of Christianity.



Jesus' closest students, called the disciples, began to travel and tell people about his teachings. The disciples and other apostles set up many churches throughout the Mediterranean, and Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire. The Romans did not like this one bit! Many Christians were brutally executed for their beliefs. Christians expected that Jesus would return to help them. After a while, many realized that Jesus wasn't coming right away. In the meantime, they decided to work to create the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Christianity splintered into different groups. Most Christians believed that God is expressed as a trinity of the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit, but they disagreed about other details of their beliefs. A saint named Saint Patrick used the shamrock with its three equal leaves as a symbol of the Trinity. Christians didn't agree on a statement of belief, called a creed, until 390 A.D. This statement is called the Apostle's Creed.

Even though Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century A.D., Christians didn't agree about the role of Jesus. Some groups thought he was purely divine, while other thought he was also human. This is the main argument between the Orthodox Christians and the Western Catholic traditions, or churches. Other arguments centered on the role of Mary, his mother.

Christians faced these internal challenges, and they had another big problem. Their hold on Jerusalem began to unravel. Muslims wanted control of the Holy Land, so members of the two faiths battled for centuries. Persians sacked Jerusalem in 615 A.D., but the Christians recaptured it later. Muslims conquered it again 638 A.D. When the Crusaders took over the Holy Land in 1096 A.D., they called it Outremer. Outremer only lasted until 1291 A.D. because the Muslims recaptured the Holy Land again. It was a brutal game of "capture the Holy Land," which killed many people.

The Crusades began when Pope Urban II gave a rousing sermon in Clermont, France. If you were a bored French nobleman, you may have decided (in the excitement of the moment) to help rescue the Holy Land from the infidels. Later, you may have regretted your decision because being a Crusader was hard work! Armor was hot and uncomfortable. It was so heavy that knights had to be lifted up onto their horses with pulleys and ropes. Noblemen were used to a much softer life. One of the few honors a knight received was to be buried in a special tomb. The figure on the top of the casket had crossed legs and a shield. So the next time you are in an old church in Europe, you can look for a knight's tomb.

By 1500 A.D., many Europeans were unhappy with the Catholic Church. Sometimes the men who became priests or pope were more interested in power and wealth than in religious faith. A German monk named Martin Luther "protested" these faults of the leadership of the Catholic Church. In 1517, he compiled a list of 95 complaints against the Church. He wanted change, so his movement was called the Protestant Reformation. Differences between Protestants and Catholics caused many wars in England, Spain, France, and other countries.

Name _____



Date _____

During the next few centuries, it became dangerous to admit anything about your beliefs because you never knew who would be in power next! Many people wanted more religious freedom. By the eighteenth century, Europeans began to expand into the Americas, Asia, and Africa, and they took Christianity with them. The United States was founded by Christians seeking a place where they could freely practice their faith.

Over the centuries, some people were recognized by Christians for their holiness and devotion. These people are called saints by the Catholic Church. Many stories of the saints don't even seem possible, such as the stories of an Italian friar named Padre Pio. Padre Pio had the gift of the stigmata, or the wounds of Christ, for over fifty years.

One amazing story about Padre Pio comes from World War II fighter pilots. During one period, Southern Italy was in Nazi hands. Americans were on their way to bomb it. The pilots thought they saw a bird in the sky, but then they realized that it was a man waving his arms as if to tell them to stop! The pilots thought that they were crazy, and they tried to drop their bombs. No matter how hard they tried, the apparatus that was supposed to release the bombs would not work! So San Giovanni Rotondo, the location of Padre Pio's monastery, was spared. People believed that the flying friar was Padre Pio!

Whether you believe in flying friars or not, the history of Christianity is a tapestry rich with drama and colorful details. It spans all continents and peoples because Christianity is the largest world religion. Today, there are more than 1.7 billion Christians, and 22,000 different denominations of Christianity.

The History of Christianity

Questions

- _____ 1. What were Jesus' closest students called?
 - A. disciples
 - B. fishermen
 - C. friends
 - D. pupils
- _____ 2. What did many Christians expect soon after the ascension of Jesus?
 - A. They expected a flood.
 - B. They expected to become rich.
 - C. They expected the Romans to be nicer.
 - D. They expected Jesus to return right away.
- _____ 3. What was the name of the event that started the Protestant churches?
 - A. the Religious Revolution
 - B. the Great Rebellion
 - C. the Reformation.
 - D. Protestantism
- _____ 4. Which of the following is a statement of Christian beliefs?
 - A. the Dead Sea scrolls
 - B. the Hail Mary
 - C. the Lord's Prayer
 - D. the Apostle's Creed

Name _____



Date _____

- _____ 5. What did the Christians call the Holy Land once they recaptured it?
- A. the Promised Land
 - B. Bethlehem's gate
 - C. Victory's temple
 - D. Outremer
- _____ 6. Which of the following is the main disagreement between Western Catholic and Orthodox Christians?
- A. the existence of saints
 - B. the meaning of Holy Communion
 - C. the role of Jesus
 - D. who should lead the church
- _____ 7. What was the purpose of the Crusades?
- A. to make men strong from wearing heavy armor
 - B. to recapture the Holy Land
 - C. to give French noblemen something to do
 - D. to gather gourmet recipes from the Middle East
- _____ 8. What is the title given to a person of special holiness in the Catholic Church?
- A. a Pope
 - B. a martyr
 - C. a saint
 - D. a flying friar

What is your opinion about supernatural events attributed to saints? Do you think the story about Padre Pio is possible?



Date _____

[illegible]